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WASHINGTON -- Though he laced his words with science and emotion, President Bush's veto Wednesday of legislation to expand federally funded embryonic stem cell research--the first veto of his presidency--also formed important battle lines between Democrats and Republicans in advance of the fall midterm elections.

Bush's stand is sure to animate social conservatives whose fervor may be critical to the GOP's retaining control of Congress. But Democrats seized on the veto like a cudgel that could help them win back Congress with the electoral support of disaffected Republicans.

"We're going to do everything we can to let the American people know that what President Bush has done is wrong," said Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid of Nevada.

The veto had become a foregone conclusion after two days of passionate debate in the Senate, but the political fight is just beginning. While Democrats are largely united on the issue, Republicans are deeply divided.

Some GOP lawmakers, both moderates and conservatives, saw an opportunity to distance themselves from an unpopular president and win points with the broad swath of voters hoping to find cures and treatments for Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, diabetes, cancer, spinal cord injuries and other diseases and disabilities.

Meanwhile, the White House and other Republicans saw an opportunity to fire up their political base.

Surrounded by babies and toddlers who began life as frozen embryos and were later adopted, Bush declared, "These boys and girls are not spare parts."

"They remind us of what is lost when embryos are destroyed in the name of research," the president said. "They remind us that we all begin our lives as a small collection of cells, and they remind us that in our zeal for new treatments and cures America must never abandon our fundamental morals."

Advocates for lifting restrictions on the research and making more embryos available to scientists said they would take the issue directly to the voters.

"President Bush may have vetoed the stem cell bill today, but he has not vetoed the hopes of millions of Americans," said Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), the assistant Democratic leader. "Those families who wake up every morning to face another day with a deadly disease or a disability will not forget this decision by the president to stand in the way of sound science and medical research."

Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), one of a group of moderate Republicans who pushed for the legislation in the House, said he expected to prevail once a new president takes office in January 2009.

"He will be leaving office, and we will still be here, and we will make sure the next president advances biomedical research," Kirk said, noting that several potential Republican presidential candidates, including Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) and Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), voted for the legislation.

The House failed to override Bush's veto Wednesday night, by a vote of 235-193, which was 51 votes short.

Two-thirds of those present and voting are required in both the House and the Senate to overturn a veto.

At the White House, spokesman Tony Snow scoffed at the notion that Democrats could make political gains with the issue.

"I don't see this being a huge issue," Snow said. "And if Democrats want to make that the centerpiece of their campaign, it will be interesting."

But some see the veto as critical to motivating evangelical Christians who typically turn out in large numbers to support Republicans.

"In recent years, Republicans have relied so heavily on evangelical churches to boost their turnout numbers, they can't afford to have evangelicals feel complacent about the election," said Linda Fowler, a Dartmouth College government professor.

On the other hand, Democrats say they hope to exploit what has emerged as a profound split among Republicans.

Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.), chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, said Protestant, non-evangelical Republicans overwhelmingly favor embryonic stem cell research.

"It affects people who are non-political," he said.

Recent Gallup polling has found that most Americans support embryonic stem cell research. Among Republicans, about half find the research morally acceptable.

Most scientists believe embryonic stem cells are capable of forming all of the different tissue types found in the human body.

That could allow for the replacement of damaged and diseased cells and organs, as well as the possibility of testing and developing new drugs.

In 2001, Bush prohibited federally funded research using embryonic stem cell lines derived after Aug. 9 of that year. Scientists have complained that only 22 of the cell lines are available for use and that they are of limited genetic diversity.

Opponents of the research, however, have argued that it shows little promise while also destroying human life. They have pushed for additional federal funding of adult stem cell and umbilical blood cord research.

At the White House, Bush issued his veto in private, without cameras present. He also signed a bill into law to prohibit "fetal farming," growing fetuses for the sole purpose of harvesting tissue, which is something that scientists say is not happening.

As he explained his decision in the ornate East Room of the White House, he noted that he was the first president to provide funding for embryonic stem cell research. He pointed out that there is no ban on this research. And he said his policy has allowed the National Institutes of Health to make more than 700 shipments of stem cells to researchers over the last five years.

Nevertheless, Bush said no new embryos--funded by the federal government--should be destroyed for the sake of research.

Bush's decision to prevent the expansion of federally funded embryonic stem cell research even drew the wrath of some conservative Republicans who oppose abortion.